The Lady is Cold.

E. B. W.

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THE LADY IS COLD

& Other Poems

THE LADY IS COLD

POEMS BY

E. B. W.

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To Janet Hart White

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I. *Across from Jersey*

IN RE LIFE

At nine my little doings are begun:
I thumb the thumby files, and note the day,
And write — on some small doing that is done —
"O.K."

The owl-faced phone begins its questioning,
My pencil leaves an odd, cubistic track,
And like as not you'll hear me say: "I'll ring
You back."

With blanks and clips I make my tiny fuss,
The tides of memoranda ebb and flow;
How well I know that such and such is thus
And so!

But soon, at five, my office day is o'er,
And through the dome of blue the bright stars press,
Reminding me that I am funny — more
Or less.

The June bug bumps his head upon the screen,
The lilac blows the last sweet kiss of spring;
Compared with these my doings do not mean
A thing.

Yet though my tasks with stars cannot be matched,
And men and days and hours are all a myth,
I feel it's something just to be attached
Herewith.

SUNDAY

THE gentlemen's sticks swing extra high,
So sharp the air, so March the sky;
The gentlemen's steps are extra spry
And gentlemen's hats are silk and high,
When Millicent takes me walking.

The lady-fairs' boots are zippered tight,
So bleak the wind, so near the night;
And lady-fairs' noses are red, not white:
It's hardly an advantageous light
When Millicent takes me walking.

The little dogs' robes are buckled fast,
So chill the day, so swift the blast;
On three-skip-one they patter past,
Oh, little dogs' legs go extra fast
When Millicent takes me walking!

The icicles cling to the funniest things,
To a red moustache, to a griffin's wings,
To the under side of a Buick's springs,
Oh, an icicle doesn't care where it clings
When Millicent takes me walking!

Oh, gentlemen's sticks swing extra high,
And sharp the air and March the sky,
And lady-fairs' boots are zippered tight,
Oh, bleak the wind, oh, near the night!

And little dogs' robes are buckled fast,
So chill the day, so swift the blast,
And icicles don't care where they cling —
Yet Millicent says it will soon be Spring
When Millicent takes me walking!

MARBLE-TOP

At counters where I eat my lunch
In dim arcades of industry,
I cock my elbows up and munch
Whatever food occurs to me.

By many mirrors multiplied,
My silly face is not exalted;
And when I leave I have inside
An egg-and-lettuce and a malted.

And just to hear the pretty peal
Of merry maids at their pimento
Is more to me than any meal
Or banquet that I ever went to.

JURY DUTY

"To none we sell, to none delay,
"To none deny the right or justice."
The district attorney has no hair,
The flag above the judge's chair
Moves with a vagrant breath of air,
And the sunbeam shows where the dust is.

The district attorney has no hair,
"To none deny the right or justice."
The bearded barristers of old
Who once sent thieves to the gallows cold
Now hang, themselves, in frames of gold
On the wall, where the tell-tale rust is.

SUBWAY PEOPLE

Sitters, waiters, — riders to eternity,
Shuffling in the shadow world, all day long;
Standers, thinkers, — joggers to eternity,
Swaying to the rhythm of the sad loud song.

Faces, people, — travelers to Nowhere,
Reading what the ads say: Buy My Soap!
Dreamers, waiters, — never getting Nowhere,
Riding to the places of the Long Lost Hope.

Chewers, dreamers, — riders to eternity,
Buried in the slumber of the deep black hole;
Sleepers, workers, — laughing at eternity,
Shoulder blade to shoulder blade, and soul to soul.

RITUAL FOR A RESTAURANT

WHY should you be sitting there
In a chair?
Who placed you across from me —
You, who any girl might be,
Drinking tea?
Suddenly
All the good that in me lies
Finds completion in your eyes,
And without the slightest reason.
Surely there can be no reason.

That which passed from me to you —
What have things like that to do
With this stew?
Who denies an interchange
Made without a single glance
To provide the sustenance
For our treason?
Doubtless we shall never meet;
You will eat, and I will eat;
Each will leave.
Each will saunter up the street
Thinking, "We shall never meet."
Do not grieve:
Over chicken à la king
We have had our journeying.

Spread that little piece of butter,
There is nothing you can utter —
Something intervenes.
Neither of us can explain
What it means.
Tea?
Now I watch you raise your spoon
(One lump only?)
Knowing that you walk with me
Where the windy sky goes free
To the valleys deep and lonely,
(Raise your cup and one lump only,
There — I hoped you'd drop your spoon)
To the valleys of the moon.

JOURNEYS

I LIKE to loaf on Mangin Street
And watch the city's mongrel fleet;
I like to buy a ten-cent ride
To Ninety-sixth and Riverside
And sit beneath a maple tree
And let it drop its seeds on me.
And I have fun in market places
Mixing my face with other faces,
Or breasting up the Avenue
To pass the people in review.

When I am very poor and all
I go and stand at Broad and Wall;
And there are things in Essex Street
That, walking round, I like to meet:
Blue sailors with their fluffy dates,
And little kids on roller skates.
But most of all, if you would know,
I like, on late spring days, to go
And just as it is getting dark
To sit unshaven in a park.

BALLAD OF LITTLE FAITH

At certain times in every day
I seem about to write a play
So deeply true,
So fine, so new,
So full of all humanity
That it will write itself in fire
And send my stocks a whole lot higher
And brand me mad,
A wondrous lad,
And vindicate my vanity.

Sing ho, sing hey, sing ho, sing hey,
The young man thinks he'll write a play,
But only at certain times of day!

When I sit down with proper zeal
To write the play I really feel,
Gird on the pen
With strength of ten
And try to do some thinking,
I find it's time to pay a call,
Or put the laundry in the hall,
Or kiss a maid,
Or build my trade,
Or do a little drinking.

Sing ho, sing hey, sing ho, sing hey,
He thinks he'd like to write a play,
But only at certain times of day.

Perhaps if I could write one line
That all the world could see was fine,
One perfect phrase
To ease my days
And make my nights effectual,
I'd give up love and food and friends
And dreams and life and means-to-ends,
And brood and brood
In solitude,
Entirely intellectual.

Sing ho, sing hey, sing ho, sing hey,
He wants to brood and write a play,
But only at certain times of day.

With plays by men who catch their stride
By dint of turning life aside,
Foregoing all,
A kiss, a call,
I never have been smitten;
But while I hold them deep in scorn
And still stay out each night till morn,
It's not amiss
That I say this:
Those plays at least get written!

Sing ho, sing hey, sing ho, sing hey,
He knows he'll never write a play —
Except at certain times of day!

WEST STREET

You don't know where they come from,
You don't know where they go:
The boxes of the Lehigh,
The crates of B. & O.
There's no street like West Street
For sitting in the sun,
When trucks are on the up-and-up
And teams are on the run.

There's no street like West Street
For chickens in the raw,
The flurriest and best street
Where drivers make the law;
The greenest pea and pepper street,
The toughest street to boss,
The loudest street to listen to,
The widest street to cross.

When flags are in the morning,
And vanes are in the breeze,
I'd rather be on West Street
Than sail the seven seas.
When trucks are on the up-and-up
And teams are on the run,
There's no street like West Street
For sitting in the sun.

GRAMERCY PARK

On a night that was cold, a night all dark,
I climbed the fence of Gramercy Park,
To the top of the pickets, cold and high,
Up went my hand and up went I,
Then down came my foot, followed by me,
And there was I who hadn't a key —
Alone was I in a private park
On a night that was cold, a night all dark.

Said I to the statue of Edwin Booth:
"I climbed in here to look for truth."
Said the statue of Edwin Booth to me:
"This park is administered privately;
"You may be in search of truth and beauty,
"But where is your sense of civic duty?
"You haven't a pass and you haven't a key,
"So get out," said Edwin Booth to me.

The night stood still as he ceased to talk,
And I scuffed away on the gravel walk;
A small blue star in the crotch of a tree
Lit the dark way through Gramercy.

"Listen," called Booth, "come back!" he cried,
"Who is that girl that I see at your side?
"Are you her lover, is she your bride?
"And how in the world did she get inside?"

"Maybe you're seeing things," I said,
"You're cold and bronze, and you're fairly dead."
"It isn't that," he replied, "it's only
"That nights in a private park are lonely;
"She's awfully sweet, I admire your taste,
"I notice your arm is around her waist —
"You haven't a pass and you haven't a key,
"But give her a little kiss for me."

Said I to the statue of Edwin Booth:
"I climbed in here to look for truth."
"Then here is a truth I know," he said,
"It's fun to be living and dull to be dead,
"And people are burdened with too much sense,
"And almost nobody climbs a fence.
"You haven't a pass and you haven't a key,
"But give her the tiniest kiss for me!"

On a night that was cold, a night all dark,
I climbed back out of Gramercy Park,
To the top of the pickets, cold and high,
And down to the street, 'neath the public sky.
And I don't know where nor I don't know when
I'll ever go climbing a fence again.

FIVE O'CLOCK

Clouds are up from Jersey,
  Winds are off the bay;
Hang fast, hang fast,
  There goes the day!

Lights are in the windows,
  Peaks go up the blue;
Look sharp, look sharp,
  What man are you?

Ships are off for Cherbourg,
  Bridges ride the air;
Sniff hard, sniff hard,
  Nights come rare.

Skies are dipping wind sails,
  Men go home to sup,
Jersey runs her eastings,
  China's on the up.

Clouds and winds and night time,
  Ships that blow away —
Hang fast, hang fast,
  There goes the day!

WINDOW BOX

Upon my somewhat sunny ledge,
With partial glimpses of the sky,
A morning glory took the pledge
To grow and bloom — and not to die.

I put the seed to earth in May
With ivy plants in pretty layers;
I watered it each sultry day
And sprinkled it with little prayers.

In June a verdant shoot appeared:
I gave it trellises to climb on,
And toward the sky it curled and veered,
And height was what it spent its time on.

The summer days were loud and bright,
And dust was on the waving leaves,
And insects gnawed the stem at night,
And Death hung bat-like from the eaves.

Defying all, it burst in bloom
Just as it reached the upper story,
And while the morning filled my room
The folks upstairs got all the glory.

THE LADY IS COLD

Intimations at Fifty-eighth Street

THE fountain is dry at the Plaza,
The sycamore trees go bare;
The ivy is sere and it has a
Resigned and immutable air.

The lady is cold at the fountain,
The sitter is cold on the ledge,
The Plaza is gaunt as a mountain,
The air is a knife with an edge.

But what is this sniff and this twitter,
And what is the pluck at my vest?
What gleam in the eye of the sitter?
What lamb of a cloud in the west?

The earth is but held in solution,
And March will release before long
The lady in brazen ablution,
The trees and the fountain in song!

My life is mostly paper clips,
And rubber bands, and little slips,
And marginal notations;
A paragon of industry,
I sometimes wonder is it me,
And why the complications?

My life is putting things in piles,
And taking things from little files,
And getting drinks of water;
And writing phrases I have swiped
From other writers, to be typed
By someone else's daughter.

My life is saying no for yes,
And yes for no, and try and guess,
And calling someone's number;
My life is getting up to shave,
To shave to eat, to eat to slave,
To slave to eat to slumber.

My life is largely paper clips,
And to-and-from-the-office trips,
My desk is flat and tidy;
I rise and work and go to bed,
My life is everything I've said.
That's why I sail next Friday!

SOLILOQUY AT TIMES SQUARE

The time for little words is past;
We now speak only the broad impertinences.
I take your hand
Merely to help you cross the street
(We are such friends),
Choosing the long and formal phrase
Deliberately.
At dinner we discuss, rather intelligently,
The things one should discuss at dinner. So.
How well we are in tune — how easy
Every phrase! The long words come, fondling the ear,
Flattering the mind they come. Long words
Enjoy the patronage of noble minds,
The circumspection of this sanity.

How much is gone! How much went
When the little words went: peace,
Sandwiched in the space between madness and madness;
The quick exchange of every bright moment;
The animal alertness to the other's heart;
The reality of nearness. Those things went
With the words.

Suppose I should forget, grow thoughtless —
What if the little words came back,
Running in upon me, running back
Like little children home from school?
Suppose I spoke — oh, I don't know —

Some vagrant phrase out of the summer!
What if I said: "I love you"? Something as simple
And as easy to the tongue as that —
Something as true? I'm only talking.
Give me your hand,
We must by all means cross this street.

CITY EVENING

The light that burned me up by day
Decides a little while to stay,
And writes a long and golden scrawl
In tree-leaf shadows on my wall.
The bulbous sun has spilled his fire,
Impaled upon a Jersey spire;
And hard day-objects of the street
Grow soft, in the long light, and sweet.
Noon's hot fortissimo still clings,
Muted in many murmurings;
And with the lingering light o'erspread
My thoughts are all new garmented.
Far down the block in yellow ease
Behind a row of gold-tipped trees
The "L," like some old dream, goes by
Betwixt the Avenue and sky.

THE CIRCUS

I DID not see the pachyderms —
  Which every one expects to;
I saw instead a dark-haired girl
  Whom I sat next to.

I did not hear the clowning acts,
  The jangle or the roar;
And yet I heard a whispering
  I'd heard twice before.

They say there was a tight-rope man
  Balanced athwart the air;
I counted more precarious
  My sitting there.

I cannot now remember one —
  The smells, the shouts, the laughter;
Why must I still remember her
  From whom I parted after?

AFFIDAVIT IN PLATITUDES

Love is the cause of war and death in battle,
Of public woe and private indigestion;
Love is a bore, a nuisance, and a chattel,
Love is the wrong reply to every question.

Stealing the eye, Love leaves the mind in darkness;
Stealing the mind, Love leaves the heart in pain;
Stripping the flesh to all its fearful starkness,
Love wanders calmly off to make a train.

Love is a word unfaithful wives have need of,
Seeking a vindication for their course;
Love is a bond no man was ever freed of,
Love is a beggar riding on a horse.

Love is the clip that binds in clumsy fashion
Who never should be bound at all, 'twould seem;
Love is a thing young men confuse with passion;
Love is a thing young girls confuse with Dream.

For Love alone one does or does not marry,
Being an ill whose cure is worse than illness;
For Love there is no weight one does not carry,
For Love the heart endures an Arctic stillness.

In every instance Love is all one-sided;
Love is a joke so old it isn't funny.
Who loves most deep, most deep for Love is chided;
Love is a thing you buy with wooden money.

Love is a tree whose top is so much higher
  Than are the tops of any other trees,
A man in love becomes perforce a liar
  Merely describing all the things he sees.

Love makes each hill, each cloud, each tumbling ocean
  Seem incomplete till Love's delight shall share it;
Love makes contempt the payment for devotion,
  And then unfits the human mind to bear it.

Love is absurd, uncouth, a grim delusion;
  Love is a boat unfit to go to sea in;
And yet, from what I know of Love's confusion,
  I don't know any state I'd rather *be* in.

THE CUCKOO

THROUGH the night
With the still house sleeping,
I perch tight
Where the hours are creeping.
Flings my door
With a quick small warning,
I out-pour
To the dark still morning.

My shrill screams
Through my tiny portal
Pierce the dreams
Of the sleeping mortal,
Till a ray
Where the curtain narrows
Heralds the day
And the chirp of sparrows.

Songs I've heard
And can never utter,
Songs of a bird
From the street and the gutter;
Beak and claws
For love's bright questing,
Strings and straws
For April nesting.

Fight and die
With your blood and sinew,
Not so I —
I shall still continue.
Go you by
To the sun and the towers:
Here I'll lie
With my creeping hours!

COMMUTER

COMMUTER — one who spends his life
In riding to and from his wife;
A man who shaves and takes a train
And then rides back to shave again.

NATURA IN URBE

WHILE midnight clung to every shore
I walked me round the reservoir,
With little cause and little sense
I ambled round and round the fence,
And once, while standing quietly,
I saw a little duck swim by.

I plainly saw his head a-wobble,
I plainly saw his tail a-bobble,
As all across the captive lake
He spread his negligible wake.
And I can scarce begin to tell
How mystical this caravel,
Or how surprised I was to see
A duck as wide awake as me.

Afloat at night upon the deep
You'd think a duck would go to sleep,
You'd think a normal duck would hanker
To close his eyes and ride at anchor;
You'd think a duck would set his breast
Against the wave, and come to rest;
You'd think that twelve o'clock were late
For any duck to navigate
All round and round the reservoir.
I wondered what he did it for.

I wondered if he'd left his kind
Because of something on his mind,
A midnight sail to clear his vision
And help him reach some duck decision.
Surely he would not swim and swim
Were something hard not troubling him.
It was preposterous to think
A duck would rouse to get a drink;
Nor was it anything but silly
To think he paddled willy nilly;
And though 'twas funny to suppose
A little duck had secret woes,
And though it put me on my mettle
To guess what problems ducks must settle,
I liked to think he swam the deep
Because he simply *could not* sleep.

COLDLY, TO THE BRONZE BUST OF HOLLEY IN WASHINGTON SQUARE

Not your dark face but that unfiltered light
That slid across your shoulder from the moon
Halted our little steps on the still night
When every pause meant we should part less soon.
Why did the very sternness of your gaze
That drew from out the air a brazen chill
Work some unholy charm in the moon's rays
And leave them blunt and colorless and still?
Could your cold silent stare, my heart deterring,
Effect a cold constraint as hard as this:
That when I felt a hand in my hand stirring
And read the breathless proffer of a kiss
I could not then unbend to claim my prize
Simply because you would not close your eyes?

SONNET

My clock has ceased to tick the stately hours
And thinks by sloth to steal a march on Time,
As though the sun would stick on eastern towers
And bells be hushed in every western clime.
Vain little clock upon my tidy shelf,
Hoping to still the universal tide!
I think I hear it chuckling to itself
That it the undefiable defied.
Oh well, what easy toil it makes for me:
'Tis long since these frail verses were begun
And yet, however tedious they may be,
They're started and in no time they are done.
My heart is like the clock. If you don't mind it,
'Twere sweet of you, my dear, were you to wind it.

AMOR SOPORUS

Could I, awake, find such unmingled bliss
As I, not quite awake, am wont to find,
And were the conscious boon of your sweet kiss
One half so vibrant as the imagined kind,
Then I from slumber's thrall, all quick and bright,
Would wrest myself — nor ever more delay
To shed the dream-thick stupors of the night
And don the actualities of day.

But you, my love, to sleep are much beholden
When I, a-dream, at morning's threshold pause,
For in that middle ground you seem all golden,
Transcending human form and earthly laws.
In justice, then, to you (to put it straight),
I make a point of sleeping very late.

NUGATORY

The little roads I travel
  In this my to-and-froing
Have only served to ravel
  The thread of where I'm going.

The thoughts that spin and caper
  Through my attempts at thinking
Convey, when brought to paper,
  Nothing worth pen-and-inking.

And there are days so futile,
  So neither here nor there-ish,
I scarce know what to do till
  It's time to up and perish.

GREETINGS

Now April taps upon the earth
And wakes the little frogs to laughter,
Now old dead things have found new birth
And Easter blossoms follow after.

No wonder I have lightly turned
To send you greetings of the Spring —
My dear, as far as I'm concerned
You are the cause of Everything.

* * *

These lines I gave a man to give
Her without whom he could not live.
He lacked the little skill to make them,
I lacked a girl who'd even take them.

NOTES FROM A DESK CALENDAR

Monday

Now grows my heart unruly
At mention of your name,
And if I love you truly
Is anyone to blame?
(No answer required.)

Tuesday

Suppose the glance you gave me
While standing by my chair
Struck home, could aught then save me?
And am I one to care?
(No answer desired.)

Wednesday

The persons who have seen us
Together — have they guessed
There stands so much between us
Which has not been confessed?
(No answer requested.)

Thursday

Does earth, with each new sun-up,
Abundantly proclaim
My heart in yours is done up?
And do you feel the same?
(No answer suggested.)

Friday

The trays upon my table
  Are labelled OUT and IN;
Was any man less able
  To have his day begin?
    (No answer projected.)

Saturday

Were I more plain and artless
  In setting forth this love,
Could you continue heartless
  In re the lines above?
    ("No" answer expected.)

NAVIGATION

It never has been hard for me
To quit my duties clerical
And take my passage on the sea
Where things are blue and spherical.

I leave the sane and stable shore
To learn a ship's propensities,
And standing aft or standing fore
I ponder the immensities.

I string my log-line to the Bear,
Lying upon the boat deck;
I let the south wind muss my hair
Upon a less remote deck.

I build my little continents
With capes of hope for rounding;
I buy a drink for twenty cents
And take a mental sounding.

But everywhere I go or stand,
From foc'sle to galley,
A passenger is right at hand
To organize a rally,

Or mention that it's getting rough,
Or tell me of a tea dance,
When all I want is time enough
To watch the sparkling sea dance.

For me no sea, no ship, no sky
  Can ever really matter
While lady tourists gallop by,
  A-tremble and a-chatter.

By day they quite obstruct the view,
  These Doras and these Janets;
By night they vilify the crew
  And nullify the planets.

I never sock them on the head,
  For I am kind and dutiful;
But when at last they're all in bed,
  Oh but the sea is beautiful!

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE, SLIGHTLY COCK-EYED, SEES THE OLD YEAR OUT

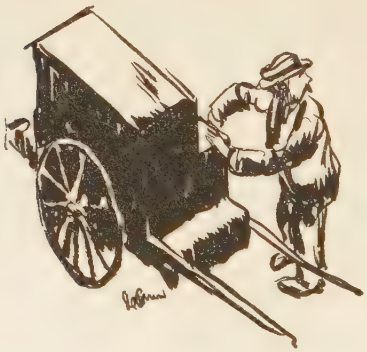
FROM Meadowbrook and valley,
From William Randolph Hearst,
No Schumann-Heink or Talley,
Nor worst that comes to worst
Can hope to fill the Garden
With either Ray or Vardon,
Not even Elizabeth Arden
Is January First.

Though Alfred Lunt were Hoover,
Though Hoover were as three,
Death is the end of lover,
And Other the half of We.
With ardor trans-Atlantic,
Le Bourget fields and frantic,
Only the sky is antic,
Only the Shubert Lee.

From cooking laws and tenant,
From hope of wine and beer,
The Pirates lost the pennant,
But Otto Kahn is here;
And no one's wings seraphic,
And neither lane of traffic,
Nor Daily News nor Graphic
Will last another year.

I am tired of Calvin Coolidge,
And WBGX,
Of Nicholas Murray knowledge,
And U. S. Navy wrecks;
I am weary of Savoy Plazas,
Gershwins and Gatti-Casazzas,
And houses without piazzas,
And everything but sex.

From too much dusty sweeping,
From too much Harold Ross,
We place in Lindbergh's keeping
A nation's tennis loss,
Where songs and dead winds sighing,
And Dorothy Parker crying,
Repose, with non-stop flying,
'Neath the eternal moss.



VILLANELLE

Of a Man Who Tried to Select a Christmas Card

A Merry Christmas and a bright . . .
To you and yours from me and mine . . .
When shepherds on that holy night . . .

With all good wishes for a right . . .
With radiance the star did shine . . .
A Merry Christmas and a bright . . .

I'm wishing it with all my might . . .
These berries red are just a sign . . .
When shepherds on that holy night . . .

This card I'm sending you is white . . .
The season's greetings are in line . . .
A Merry Christmas and a bright . . .

And then there shone a heavenly light . . .
Hello, there, kid, I hope you're fine . . .
When shepherds on that holy night . . .

This card of mine is just a slight . . .
May happiness and love divine . . .
A Merry Christmas and a bright . . .
When shepherds on that holy night . . .

CLINIC JOUST

They plumbed the slow blood flowing,
  They added up my breath,
But did not spy inside me
  The enemy of Death.

And while they took my pulse-beat
  I plumed the warring knight
And buckled on his insults
  And set him on to fight.

And Death was shocked and routed —
  But not by breath nor sigh —
By tilting at his armor,
  And spitting in his eye.

A LIBRARY LION SPEAKS

I

I DO not care what hours have slipped
Since April's torrid lovers tripped
Along these steps; for all that while
I've worn my supercilious smile,
And now, with snow upon my jowl,
Through storms that chill and winds that howl,
In attitude unchanged I hear
Music of the departing year —
A paragon, as you'll agree,
Of imperturbability.

II

Through summer's fall, through winter's spring,
I see the peoples journeying:
The goers south, the goers north,
The comers home, the farers forth,
Each little man who thinks he knows
The dancer that's inside his clothes.
And I — with nothing else to do —
I try to look as though I knew!
Which helps explain, it seems to me,
My imperturbability.

III

I mark the bright expectant looks
Of those who come to read in books:
The graybeard, at his soul's behest
Exploring life's unanswered jest;
The stripling knight astride a dream,
His eyes alight, his spurs agleam —
The library! There's nothing there
Not found upon my thoroughfare.
Which quite excuses, as you see,
My imperturbability.

IV

I read each day, at even-fall,
The mightiest poem of them all:
The city, at the edge of night,
Hung in a pale and trembling light,
Sung to the quick, the listening ears,
Scrawled with a pen first dipt in tears,
The city where I crouch in state,
Aware that I have long to wait.
Which vindicates, to some degree,
My imperturbability.

V

Nor have I brooded here in vain
And heard low songs made in the rain:
I've seen how men will feed a dove
Who have not any other love,
I know the hope that somehow lies
In almost any pair of eyes,
I know that April comes once more
And lovers skipping through her door —
Things which have almost torn from me
My imperturbability!

A YOUNG ADVERTISING MAN, AFTER A HARD DAY AT THE OFFICE, WRITES TO THE GIRL HE LOVES

You are a person of exacting taste —
You want the best there is — and that means ME.
You hate men knock-kneed, dumb, or double-faced:
I stand the most exacting scrutiny!

That I have (1) a very pleasing eye,
(2) shapeliness, (3) charm, and (4) *esprit*
You'll soon be well aware. And that is why
Discriminating women all choose ME.

"I never really lived till I met HIM!"
That's how one lady put it. Yes, and she
Is only one of scores who like my vim.
There *is* no other man as good as ME.

Remember, there are lots of worthless men
Striving to gain the field through mimicry;
So may I caution you just once again —
Beware of imitations. Ask for ME.

P.S. — An hour with ME's an hour of glee!

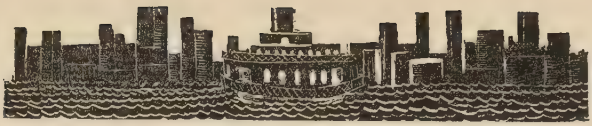
CRITIC

THE critic leaves at curtain fall
To find, in starting to review it,
He scarcely saw the play at all
For watching his reaction to it.

FROM AN OFFICE

THE smoke that follows noontime
Rides down the rifts of walls;
Dirt and sun in the alley,
Glimmering dust falls.

I hear the clack of the tickers,
I tend the click of wires:
And dream of old leaves in gutters,
And October fires.



LULLABY FOR A CITY BABY

LITTLE urban urchin, sleep!
Dream the song the night is singing;
Lordly towers thy watch shall keep,
And bells ringing.
Sleep, little urchin, sleep!

Little city baby, sleep!
Hear, in dreams, the ferries blowing;
They discuss in voices deep
Where they're going.
(Sleep, little tadpole, sleep.)
Dream about their lovely names:
Christopher and Lackawanna;
Slumber on, my little sweet,
While they blow to Barclay Street;
Sad they are, and sad shall be,
Destined not to go to sea.
Little town babe,
Pink-and-brown babe, sleep!

Baby rocked in noise and din,
Let the sounds come gently in:
  Sleep, my darling, sleep.
In the early hours of dark
Bell notes fall upon the Park —
  Do not wake!
Every striking of the gong
Is a part of the night's song.
  (Do not wake!)
Hear, in sleep, the far drummer
Orchestrate the end of summer:
Wheels and horns and bells ringing —
Dream the song the town is singing.
  Sleep, little man-child, sleep.

II. *River Roads*

ROAD BY A RIVER

Now in the time of the blowing leaf
And the apple sky and the brown clutter
I live with the turning red of grief
And the fall of words too old to utter.
In the time of the duckwings going over
I live the spring and the new green cover.
Here I knew, where this sweet fire is,
The marching spears of purple iris.
The hunting moon that will drop a sliver
Into the drowsy lop-eared river
Lay, in the June night, soft as a pillow
Under the arms of the sleeping willow.
Softly and brown, softly and brown,
The river goes running away from town,
A lop-eared river, running a trail,
A sad old setter with burrs in its tail.
Why do I follow it, follow it down,
To see it go running, so softly, so brown?
Here where the sorrowing smoke-wind passes,
Strumming the strings of the spent season,
Stroking the beards of the timothy grasses,
Humming the song, giving no reason,
I heard, such a little time ago,
The first new wind that crept from the snow.
Rivers are wide, from side to side,
Rivers are apt to be much too wide.
Men are in cities — I hear their feet
Go pittering pattering down the street,
Go not-much-mattering down the street.

Two small boys, with the spoils of fall,
Sit in the dusk on an old stone wall
Cracking nuts with a stone for a cracker,
Smoking corn-silk pipe terbacker:
Why do I see them blowsy and shrill
Running a kite from a gusty hill,
Kneeling in warm bright clover grasses,
Making a grasshopper spit molasses?
  Softly and brown, softly and brown,
  The river goes running away from town,
    With the blowing leaf
    And the old grief
    And the apple sky
    And the brown clutter,
  And the fall of words too dead to utter.

FOR THINGS THAT ARE A PART OF ME

WHEN days, by ending, make me old;
When neither fortune comes nor gold;
When love, with eyes that speak the truth,
Backs slowly from me like my youth,
And friends who know their way alone
Go forth and leave me, one by one;
Still must I very thankful be
For things that are a part of me:
That when I read a pretty line
A little flame goes down my spine,
That when I see the morning sun
I laugh to think the world's begun.

EXPECTANCY

THE grass at night is sweet in country places,
In honor of green morrows yet to be;
The little stream slides bright through moonstruck spaces,
In fond anticipation of the sea.
Beneath a hill, low in the drowsy willows,
A hundred frogs invisible and clear
Have propped themselves on green and froggy pillows
To blow their flutes and say that Spring is near.

But not the sweet grass hopeful of the day,
Nor moonbright stream with all its happy humming,
Nor fluting frogs that sit up nights to play
And warn the waiting world of what is coming,
Shall know or feel or sing the expectant song
I sing who wait where you will walk along.

DISCOVERY

In youth I plucked the rain,
  Governed the flight of birds,
And sought not to chain
  Either with words.

Later, I wrote their song
  Cleverly line by line:
No rain or bird flying
  Has since been mine.

IMPERIAL AIRWAYS

So arrogant, so proud,
I sit upon a cloud,
High upon a cloud over England.

Cleverly I pull myself up,
With my baby hands ascending,
Ascending loudly with my little mind,
Rising proudly with my little mind;
Sit like thunder, looking down on bands of sheep,
Grinning at gravity, poaching on sunlight —
So arrogant and proud over England.

Who am I, that I can fly?
Drunk with the noise of it, the tri-motored monody,
Cushioned at my ease,
A-crossing of my knees,
Over the Channel,
Over blue seas.
The bride and groom in the row behind
Are kissing, are kissing.
The dalliance of the eagles!
Dalliance of the Wichita, Kansas, eagles.
The lady right across
Is sick to her stomach —
A bird with nausea! Flap your wings!
Triumph of mind
Over stomach.
A lady in a cloud with indigestion,
Flying to Paris on an upset stomach.

I see the sun
On the tappets of an engine,
The wriggling tappets, skyward worming,
The intake valves of a sudden power,
The rapid pulse of ephemeral conquest.
Thanks to their strange and ingenious dance
I can be arrogant
High over France.

RETURNING

Red cannas blaze along the wall
In gardens that were mine,
Between the rows a green bug goes
To dusty vine.

The walk now sweet with sun and gold
Awaits the yellow leaf,
While slow hens croon at silent noon
And air their grief.

Outside the wall I turn away
Ere little thoughts begin:
I who come late to the garden gate
May not go in.

But spindrift shores have kept a place
For me, who have no home,
And I lie down where sands are brown
By white sea foam.

Beneath my roof of dripping stars
Voices are never heard
Save for the note of some remote
And sad sea bird.

And I lie deep with singing shells
When tides forsake the rocks,
The sea my door forever more,
Where no man knocks.

SONNET

THE small protesting manchild comes to earth
With hush-a-byes to echo his alarms,
From red rebellious moments of his birth
He swims quite blind into a pair of arms.
Through roaring hours that have nor name nor number
He paws the unresisting skies of space,
Sinking by turns into abysmal slumber
To blow warm breath upon a hovering face.
A baby is compact — a man complete,
Sucking the stuff of life because it's good;
He crawls in guided paths and finds them sweet
With little sounds and little crumbs of food.
And, from the very first unconscious gasp
The manchild holds a woman in his grasp.

SHENANDOAH ROAD

"YASSIR, yonder's the highway."

Sing it, nigger boy, sing it to me —
Song of a big road going along,
A slow-time Southland song:
New corn in a red clay field,
Red as blood where the highway cuts it,
Song of a road in the sun of morning,
A dogwood blossom, river-bending road,
Winding the hill, looking for the town,
Down, down,
A drug store, a main street, a Carolina town —
Sing that song to me!

In the soft days —
Salesmen, traveling folks,
Let them ride the cushions in the soft white-lilac days.
But let me go the valley pike
That's crazy with red-bud running wild.
There was an old tune I remember
From the jazz baby of the four-a-day:
"In the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia". . .
Pucker up now,
Whistle it to new fat lambs,
Whistle it loud to new wobbly foals,
Yes, sir, let the mountains hear —
Let me whistle that tune!

An apple tree in baby pink
Throwing a shadow across a whitewashed fence to a green lawn;
A locomotive engineer, tooting a long sigh,
Waving from the cab as the tracks swing down across the road;
A black boy, riding mule-back into town —
Long ears for the mule,
Long, dangly feet for the boy —
Riding mule-back, gazing at the New York license plates
Of a tourist up from Florida,
Dreaming of the big town he's never been to.
Sit your mule, black boy,
Dreams are taller than cities;
Water your mule in the Shenandoah
In the springtime;
Sing your slow songs, never mind the city;
A grey cabin, chinked with red mud,
At the end of a row of boxwoods:
Dark hole for a door,
Dark hole for a window,
Little dark faces at a sunshine doorstep . . .
"It's pretty weather," says the man at the filling station.

Ever seen the long shadows go along green willows by a stream?
Ever seen a cow stand stock still, in the long shadows?
Ever seen a hen in a sheep pasture
Stand stock still in May,
Waiting for something to happen?

The sun leaves the bottom lands
Long before it leaves the ridge —
And the cows are patient in the cool light
Down beneath the willow trees
Where the stream runs slow.
The old, old woman of Maggotty Creek,
She says there's still arbutus to pick
If you know where to go.

Wish on a white horse —
Make a crazy, never-come-true wish:
That the fragrance of blossoms shall last forever,
That boy-and-girl love shall last forever,
Oh, wish on a white horse
Going down the valley!

Red, yellow, and green,
The spangled lady bareback rider
Laughs from the circus billboard —
And the town girl
Walking to the circus with the cadet from the military school,
Hand in hand, free and easy,
Laughs.
The road will be lit by flares
When the drivers march the camels home to bed
Under the moon;
But the by-roads lead away from the light,
And the bent grass is warm and smooth

Where the tents have been,
Under the moon.

* * *

"Yassir, yonder's the highway."
Sing it, nigger boy, sing it to me —
Song of a big road going along,
Winding the hill, looking for the town,
A drug store, a main street, a Carolina town —
Sing that song to me!

INTIMATIONS — NOT OF IMMORTALITY

Once I felt a garden hold me,
Orange trees and long vines clinging —
I could not escape its fragrance,
Break loose from the strong vines —
Orange trees and swallows winging,
Noon and sunny paths and lizards
And a slow voice singing.
Earth was full of flowers and giving;
I was full of life and living.

Once I let the sea come round me,
Heard the talk along the shingle,
I could not deny its wishes —
Body upon the green wave,
Belly with the warm sand mingle —
Smelled the ooze of time beginning,
White shore a-tingle.
Sky and sea danced their desire;
I was blood and flesh and fire.

Sometimes, when the blood goes strongest,
Time below the ground seems longest:
Walking in the hot garden,
Swimming the green sea,
Death was my warden,
Death came to me —
I alive upon the sand
Knew that Death was near at hand;

I in garden closes walking
Heard the Shape beside me stalking.

Always, when the blood goes strongest,
Time below the ground seems longest.

SPRING PLANNING

Let the sun go on if it will, promising much;
Let earth respond, lift up foolishly,
Try the power of her recovered sweetness
And give of her swamp smells.
Let the new sun go on, promising much,
I'll not go along this time.

I think I've had enough of hopefulness,
Green things and promises, new things and promises;
Rather than go through that once more,
Knowing spring comes to no good end,
Rather than rehearse the whole long show again like a child,
Knowing the story well, knowing the ending, my mind running on ahead,
I'll try another plan,
A laugh-in-the-face plan, bitter and well thought out:
I'll wear September like a charm all spring —
The dry grass,
The dead wind,
Love pitched in the wrong key,
The fading color,
The brown last act of the play Ecstasy —
I'll turn my face away in time, my heart averted safe,
Then let earth try me!
Let earth tempt me with a face that is beautiful
(I think I've seen that face before),
With lips that smell sweet, of new things;

Let earth turn loose all her tricks — it will make no difference:
The marauding soldier bee, possessing the white flower in the sun;
The hen, brooding warmly, bulging her warmth to the eggs;
I'll not see nor hear them, pay no attention
To frog celebrants in the night, green tunes from offstage choruses,
No attention to crow calling,
To the valley alive with mystery,
To the surrounding hills alive again with love of the mysterious valley.

It's not the first time.
Once, I remember, there was a girl
Cruel as earth, bright as the new spring.
What if there was? I knew the sweetness was too short —
Short, clear as a bird-note, trailing away,
Leaving the air empty and still, the heart empty,
Leaving the heart blistering to that year's harvest sun,
Trying foolishly to cry to that year's harvest moon, finding no tears.
Where is the love, I said, that's worth love's ending?
Where the brightness worth the resultant grey?
The fierce glad season worth the death of it?

I say I have a better plan:
Let the sun go on, promising much,

Posting its love letters on the east wind —
I'll tear them up,
I think I'll tear them up.
I'll tear them up . . . very gently.
I do not think I am afraid to tear them up.

PORTRAIT

He goes his way with a too cautious stride
That checks him safe just short of every goal;
Seeks not conclusions lest they try his pride,
Claims not fair booty lest it glut his soul.
If it be love, he finds it unrequited,
And seasons it with sadness to the taste;
If it be fame, he finds his name is slighted,
And turns his luck aside in conscious haste.
Frustration tickles his most plaintive strings
And satisfies his bent for somber living;
He daubs with mystery the obvious things,
And holds fulfillment off — always contriving
From life (held very gingerly) to press
The fine musk odor of unhappiness.

AUGURY

And when my gift to you has been discarded,
Think of the day you turned to me and said:
"This I shall cherish always!" How I guarded
Those lovely words, yet knew them false instead.
My gift! Impudent symbol of a love
No more enduring than this grey November.
I know that now. What was I thinking of
To think you even wanted to remember!

Nothing endures. I hear your very words
When you discover that the token's lost:
"He was a nice young man." Little, keen swords
Carving a magic picture, like the frost.
Yet, though my gift shall end beneath your feet,
That does not make this pledge of yours less sweet!

ONTARIO

THE lake hangs low from sky to sky,
The gulls have eaten and said goodby;
Dead on her course the tanker goes,
And no wind blows.

The gulls no longer follow and cry,
The gulls and the land have said goodby;
The sky is low and the lake is grey,
And lonely the way.

A tanker's course is straight and straight,
Her crank-throws counting out her fate;
The faithless shore is left behind,
And out of mind.

Dead on her course the tanker goes:
The wheelsman's eyes must never close.
The wheelsman's soul has gone to sleep
Upon the deep.

An hour of gulls that wing and cry,
A path of lake from sky to sky —
Cargo for men who live and die.
A day gone by.

TO A RIVER GODDESS

A PATH of shadows to a pool,
A hand in hand on the way to school,
An urgent pear tree dressed in white
Making a border for the night;
A benediction, said too soon,
By one complete Athenian moon;
The little stir of a word spoken,
A kiss for luck, a smile for a token,
A smile for love, a smile for duty,
A little more than a smile for beauty;
A path of shadows back again,
A garden smelling of old rain,
A night bird stirred by the moon's gleam
To sing a little song in dream;
The smell of life from the quick earth rising,
A kiss more peaceful than surprising;
A train gone down the valley weeping,
A man despaired of ever sleeping.

I MARVEL AT THE WAYS OF GOD

I MARVEL at the ways of God,
For time and time again
I see Him paint such lovely clouds
Above such awkward men.

WALT SITS BESIDE ME ON THE C.P.R.

A FULL belly
And a full heart for America:
Neither for one government, nor for another government, but for the land.
I cross over boundaries
And they are the myths of man, on paper.
I cross over boundaries with a cloud, easily: and the clouds and I say that the heart of wheat is in Saskatchewan and in the Dakotas
The same and equal,
Giving the same shadows of afternoon, and the same chaff into the sunset.

There was a girl I remember, and she was out of the Valley of Okanogan.
We rode the cushions together, she and I, speaking softly together all through Manitoba, while the rails went back with the poles, and the harvest hands looked up.
Summer was gone from the grain fields, and the voice of the girl was all that summer had left,
Gentle, like a whippoorwill in Kentucky, part of the song of her body, part of her body.
A clump of trees, lonely on the prairie,
And then the girl, — a voice singing love for the prairie, rising and falling like the slow heave of the sea at night.
The rails, the early stars, and the voice, all one song through Manitoba.

IN A GARDEN

The summer night is still and hot,
And crickets make their solemn stir;
Tall weeds within my garden rot
Where iris and pale roses were.

The ghosts of flowers on old dead stalks
In hueless shapes beneath the moon
Bend to the little grassy walks
And void their phantom seeds too soon.

Through seven round and crimson eyes
The hollyhock in silence peers
And wonders if the aspen cries
Because it sinned in other years.

My ghost, with yours, on deathless heels,
Goes down the rows on nights like this,
And from your spectral lips it steals
All it remembers of a kiss.

THE SPIRIT OF ST. CHRISTOPHER

(WASHINGTON, March 6 (U.P.) — Col. Charles A. Lindbergh flew here from Belleville, Ill., during the night. It was a beautiful night for flying and the lure was too great to be resisted.)

THE secret upward pull the moon exerts
On nights too silver-bright for rest or sleeping
Connives with winds (unheard in earthdrawn hearts)
Under the wings of silver endlessly sweeping.
What are they like, those stretches of blue moor,
The lovely fields of freedom, sown with light?
What is it like to heed the moon's allure
And fly above America at night?
Suppose the moon let go, her soft charm waning,
Forsook the side of every sky-blown thing,
The ailerons of God no more sustaining,
The winds of earth no more beneath the wing!
Oh, Christopher, if trails of light go soaring,
Oh, keep the young man safe the night exploring!

SUNDAY NOON

Cuck, the hen says, in the heat of morning,
Cuck and cuck, for having laid an egg;
Dreaming on in the heat of morning —
Mornings to come, and other eggs.
The hollyhocks crane their necks,
Curious, tall-neck hollyhocks
Looking in at the window, —
And Norman says: "Dinner."

KENILWORTH

BETWEEN the rows of English yew
A willing band goes tramping through;
The schedule calls for half an hour
To view an ancient, ivied tower.

Upon the brooding, silent walls
The sound of kodak snapping falls,
And up the crumbling steps there marches
A Brooklynite with fallen arches.

The lecturer intones the tale
With thin pale jokes that never fail;
The college girls attend, and munch
A chocolate bar they brought for lunch.

The man who comes from Hackettstown
Thinks they should pull the old thing down;
The tour conductor calls below:
"Come along now, folks, it's time to go."

SONG TO BE DISREGARDED

I WROTE six poems
With love for a theme;
I slept six nights
With love for a dream.

I've read them over,
And dreamt them again:
Never give a lover
A bed or a pen.

WORDS

WORDS are not a proper thing
For a lad to play with;
Thoughts are best upon the wing,
Not to spend the day with.

Thoughts are moths that go at night,
Flying at a taper;
Never hold them to the light
Pinned upon a paper!

Words but catch the moment's tint,
Though their meaning rock you;
Never one shall fly to print
Will not live to mock you.

THIS IS A PRAYER BEFORE I SLEEP

THIS is a prayer before I sleep,
With a lay-me-down and a soul-to-keep.
I haven't prayed in a long time.
But this is a prayer for small things only
To a jealous God from a man that's lonely:
Remembered things of my life I'll weave in,
Ask of the God I half believe in —
Giver of grass and the wind that blows it
And the man that mows it.
This is a prayer.

Keep most carefully alive in me
Something of the expectancy
That is somehow likeliest to be
In a child waking,
A day breaking,
A robin singing,
Or a telephone ringing.

Give me again the strange thrill
Of a boy climbing a Maine hill,
Topping the rise,
Coming on the farmer's band of sheep:
Give me the terrible surprise
Of their raised heads, their startled eyes.

Once I shot a sparrow dead
(Hit him in the head).
Give me again the tears I shed.

And once, in a ship, in a frozen sea,
I glimpsed a thing that was really me.
In at the death
Let me draw the same courageous breath
I drew the day I looked on Unalaska.

Swallows dip low before a rain,
I've seen them time and time again.
Grant me anew the little pain
  That I used to know
  When they flew so.

Guard the most difficult part of me
That has fattened me not, but has left me free.

Now grant me, and may I keep forever
Unharmed, the memory of those ways
Walking with love, hand on her shoulder,
  Happily together.
Never allow me to forget
That which was once a kiss
And is now a phrase.

That is the prayer, and now I'll sleep,
With a lay-me-down and a soul-to-keep.
  I hadn't prayed in a long time.

OF THINGS THAT ARE

In the warm sun
  Of a strange land,
I beheld your life
  And possessed your hand.

In the real cold
  Of things that are,
I have lost hold
  Of a caught star.

(In the fine cold
  Of near things,
You are gone from me
  On foreseen wings.)

Yet I still dwell
  In a strange land,
Beholding your life,
  Possessing your hand.

TO A HOT WATER BOTTLE NAMED JONATHAN

Soon they will lay me deep to my rest —
Oh, Jonathan, ease my pain!
Warm, oh, Jonathan, warm this breast
Where never my love has lain.

My window looks to the west of the sky —
Oh, Jonathan, cease your rumble!
The trees have promised that when I die
A pitying star shall tumble.

Small is the solace in being dead
With never a love at my side:
I think I had rather get well instead,
So Jonathan, do not slide!

Look, oh, Jonathan, look at the sky,
The sky is all red and copper!
Promise me, Jonathan, you will stay by;
Strength, oh, strength to your stopper!

Jonathan, soon I'll be sleep-beguiled —
Save me from all that's harmful!
Pretend I'm a woman that's birthed a child
And you are that warm little armful.

SEPTEMBER RAIN

My sister brings her baby up on song
And bits of laughter from her heart's rich trove,
And so her baby smiles, and gets along,
With small soft noises of responding love.
My sister holds her baby to the light
And lets her peer through windows at the rain,
Spending in happy arms a baby's might
In drubbing with fat fists upon the pane.

They've left the room. I try the window now
To find the cause of love, and babes, and singing:
Outside, the dripping oaks their old heads bow
Beneath the tidings that September's bringing.
Look — on the pane the fists have left small smears!
Look — in my heart there are no songs, but tears!

SONNET

THAT same white traveler, frost, that could not pass
And not leave everywhere his lovely scroll,
Having sufficiently adorned my glass,
Painted your portrait on my secret soul.
Thus you've been with me all this winter day,
And I, who love myself, went two and two,
My actual solitude a seeming play
Built of the meaning and the breath of you.

You in each item of this day of fearing
All thoughts I wanted to — and could not — tell;
You in the log of pine, you in my hearing
The cold and holy ringing of a bell.
Your voice at sundown, swelling, repeating, thinning,
Lost in the hurrying night and the wind's beginning.

RHYME FOR A REASONABLE LADY

ONLY with words I love and own
For having loved and made them mine
Do I recapture what I've known
Or build your image in a line.

Never with thoughts I give and tell —
For all the telling and the giving —
Do I escape the curly shell
That hatefully guards this life and living.

Only alone, at peace, at night,
Have I the simple will to say
The words I love, and love to write,
For you to read, alone, by day.

DIRECTIONS FOR BURYING ME

THIS fever is the end.
Pray attend:
When I have quit this body
Do not play the usual accompaniment,
Let me go
Without that sustained pianissimo
All through the house. I hate the mortician,
The fussy smell, the shoddy
Vestment.
Oh, yes, the body . . .
It's nothing.
Summon the furnace man,
Let him dispose of it as best he can —
He has a quick Italian wit,
Let him take care of it;
He knows where that packing box is
In the cellar, in good condition
(I'm glad there's no handles).
Pull up the window shades,
Let them go up with a loud snap.
Holler through the rooms.
Show Anthony the lonely valley and the cedar glades,
Tell him, when he digs, go deep, deep, deep:
Be not afraid of hell, make sure of sleep.
Do not accept flowers —
Think of those hours and hours
A corpse must lie beneath
A regulation floral wreath.

If you would decorate the spot
Where the bones rot
Go to some old vacant lot
Where tin cans are clustered;
Choose one with a bright label
To hold timothy sprays
On the long hot days,
And, in October,
Bittersweet.
This shall be at the body's feet.
I wish, as I lie here instructing you,
I might hear children playing —
It's hard to die without praying.
Well . . . what else?
As for my property,
I have none. Throw the books away.

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